

**Environmental Quality Incentive Program Delivery in
The St. John Valley, Aroostook County, Maine
Application Evaluation and Ranking Period of FY 2015**

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers financial assistance to agricultural producers to implement on-farm conservation practices. Eligibility is determined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Eligible producers may apply for financial assistance on conservation practices that will address identified resource concerns on eligible land.

Interested agricultural producers may apply in person at the St. John Valley USDA Service Center. Applicants may also request EQIP assistance by telephone, FAX, e-mail, or letter. Send to:

District Conservationist
139 Market Street, Suite 106
Fort Kent, Maine 04743
Phone number (207) 834-3311 extension #3
Fax number (844) 332-7969
Email seth.jones@me.usda.gov

Objective: The objective of the St. John Valley/ Aroostook County Local Work Group is to utilize EQIP to promote the use of conservation practices to benefit the environment while promoting sustainable agriculture and maintaining open farmland.

Priority Resource Concerns: In the St. John Valley/Aroostook County, the Local Work Group (LWG) has identified and prioritized the following resource concerns. Practices which address these resource concerns may be eligible for financial assistance in fiscal year 2015:

HIGH: Cropland, animal waste, water use/water conservation and forestry.

MEDIUM: Pasture, Wildlife

When considering cropland, the goals are to **reduce soil erosion, reduce sedimentation, improve soil health and improve both surface and ground water quality**. Grass waterway, lined waterway, diversion, conservation crop rotation, conservation cover, filter strip, sediment basin, cover crop, pest management, nutrient management and residue management are examples of typical conservation practices that will be used to accomplish the local goals on cropland. Certified nutrient management plans (CNMPs) will be required for all financial assistance provided to livestock producers for handling manure problems. Typically, a CNMP will be developed by a technical service provider for operations greater than 25 animal units (1 AU = 1000 pounds) and the TSP will be hired by the farmer. NRCS staff will complete smaller CNMPs as time and staffing permits. Soil tests and manure tests will need to be obtained by the producer before a CNMP can be developed. The CNMP needs to be developed before funds can be obligated to pay for animal waste handling and storage practices. **It is critical that those wanting assistance in this area obtain the information that will be needed to develop the CNMP!** Surface and ground

water quality issues will be addressed under this category. The primary practices to be utilized include CNMP development and CNMP implementation practices, **waste storage structure, heavy use area protection (temporary manure storage), vegetated treatment area** and nutrient management.

Under the water use/water conservation resource category, the goal is to improve the efficiency of existing irrigation systems and provide irrigation water when existing water sources are being detrimentally affected by the pumping of water. Irrigators will be required to follow low flow standards that have been established by the State of Maine for the various water courses. Farmers need to contact the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to have them set the site specific recommended flows or water level depending upon the water resource that is currently being utilized. An Irrigation Water Management plan will also need to be developed. New irrigation systems do not qualify. Currently the Local Working Group has set aside a small percentage of the area's EQIP funds for this category. However, the Local Work Group is also recommending that farmers interested in improving irrigation efficiency to apply for the statewide irrigation initiative funds when available.

Under the forestry category, the LWG has prioritized erosion control practices. However, there is emphasis in the Farm Bill to do more silvicultural work in the nonindustrial woodlands. We will be working with the woodlot owner to develop conservation plans that will address these management practices such as tree pruning, crop tree release and thinning of the forest stand. Erosion problems on existing woodlot access roads will utilize practices such as access road, critical area seeding and stream crossing to solve the resource degradation that directly affects streams and lakes. **However, applications will only be accepted when there is an up to date Forest Stewardship Plan, or equivalent, developed that addresses the landowner's goals and objectives. For 2015 there will be no statewide EQIP forestry fund pool.**

2. **(MEDIUM)** Pasture/grazing and wildlife are two of the six resource concern categories which would be considered a medium priority based on the percentage of funding that was allocated by the LWG.

Pasture areas may create water quality problems if not managed correctly. The LWG identified practices that would reduce erosion and improve water quality as being the key issues to work on. The prescribed grazing practice will help farmers by providing a management plan on how their grazing land should be used to increase its efficiency at producing forage and to prevent it from being subject to erosion due to over grazing. Practices such as riparian forest buffer, fencing, well, spring development, watering facility and pipeline are needed to remove animals from a stream or brook and thus improve water quality. Reseeding may be required if field is subject to erosion due to poor grass cover.

In regards to wildlife, protection of grassland bird species habitat is a priority to the LWG. These species are not threatened or endangered, but are considered species of special concern to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. The upland wildlife habitat practice (bush hogging) will be utilized to carry out this effort. The LWG recommends landowners address wildlife concerns when applying for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) financial assistance by including practices in their conservation plan that will promote grassland bird habitat. Another practice that can

be completed is the fish passage practice in Brook trout watersheds. There are other practices such as waterways and stream crossings that may also benefit Brook trout habitat.

Eligible Practices and Payment Rates: For a list of practices eligible for EQIP financial assistance in fiscal year 2015, see the Maine EQIP Payment Schedule posted on the Maine NRCS website.

Sign-up: All program sign-up is continuous and applications may be taken at any time. Sign-up will be conducted according to local priorities and grouped along the lines of the resource areas that the State Technical Committee defined and that the LWG have recommended be funded in 2015.

For each funding cycle, a cutoff date will be established to provide time for screening and ranking. This sign up date was August 15th, 2014 for local Field Office funding pools. Applications received after the cutoff date will be considered for the 2016 funding cycle.

Conservation practices (both structural and management) in Forestland will be eligible for inclusion in a financial assistance contract only when a Forest Stewardship Plan, or other forest management plan that meets the State of Maine Stewardship Plan standard, has been developed for the acres to be enrolled in the program. Applications involving animal waste management such as waste storage facilities require the development of a comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP) prior to funding. There may be opportunities for financial assistance to obtain these specific types of plans. Landowners should contact the Fort Kent NRCS field office to request assistance and information.

Ranking: All eligible applications received by the funding cycle cutoff date will be screened. Those determined to be High priority will be ranked based on an on-site resource inventory and assessment. Planners will develop alternative measures to address resource concerns based on their assessment and work with the applicant to come to decisions for practice application. Ranking will be based on the decisions the applicant makes for addressing the resource concerns.

The combined ranking sheet for the St. John Valley/ Aroostook County, which incorporates resource concerns and applicable quality criteria from the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide, is the basis for ranking applications. A single combined ranking sheet will be completed for each farm or planning/contract area. Points will be assigned for those resource concerns that are not meeting quality criteria in the benchmark condition and will be improved as a result of implementation of the client's contract.

Applications will be selected for contracting in ranked order by resource area, according to the score, as available funds allow. If available funds are insufficient to contract all eligible applications, applications may be held (deferred) and considered for funding with any subsequently received applications during FY 2016.

Funding: Periodic requests for program allocations will be scheduled throughout the year as funding permits. Separate program requests will be submitted by the District

Conservationist according to the resource areas that the State Technical Committee defined and that the District Conservationist, with LWG input, has recommended be funded in 2015. Each of these requests will constitute a separate pool of ranked applications.

Allocation decisions to each Field Office will be made in the State Office based on national, state and local priorities, and the nature and extent of requests. Field Office Allocations will be split between each of the resource categories based on percentages set by the District Conservationist, as shown below. Unfunded applications will be deferred to the next program request date.

Fund Pools: The St. John Valley/ Aroostook County 2013 Local Work Group has recommended to allocate the available EQIP funds as follows for the first Application Evaluation and Ranking Period of FY2015:

Resource Category	% of Local Allocated Funding	Priority
Cropland	50%	H
Animal Waste	20%	H
Pasture	15%	M
Forestry	10%	H*
Water Use/Water Conservation	5%	H*

* There are Maine NRCS Statewide funding pools that may be utilized for funding applications in these categories. Local allocation funding not used in these categories should be added to the local Cropland resource concern fund allocation.

The District Conservationist is setting the FY2015 St. John Valley/Aroostook County fund pools for the first Evaluation and Ranking Period as follows based on LWG recommendation and changes in the Statewide Funding Pools made between the last LWG meeting and the current funding cycle Ranking period:

Resource Category	% of Local Allocated Funding	Priority
Cropland	50%	H
Animal Waste	15%	H
Pasture	10%	M
Forestry	10%	H*
Water Use/Water Conservation	5%	H*
Seasonal High Tunnel	10%	H

* There are Maine NRCS Statewide funding pools that may be utilized for funding applications in these categories. Local allocation funding not used in these categories should be added to the local Cropland resource concern fund allocation.

If you have any questions about how EQIP will be delivered in the St. John Valley/Aroostook County, please contact the District Conservationist at (207) 834-3311 ext #3.